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ABSTRACT

The Winthrop College Critical Issues Symposium for freshmen is discussed, with attention to the format of the seminar, the theoretical bases, seminar goals, strategies employed, administrative and political factors, faculty development opportunities, and assessment. The symposium is designed to help freshmen become active learners, questioners, and critical thinkers, and to show them the value of discussion and learning from one another. The symposium is a required and graded two-semester, two-credit hour course that includes the concepts of challenge and support suggested by Nevitt Sanford and L. Lee Knefelkamp's seminar teaching strategies, which encourage students to be active in the classroom and allow them to explore alternative points of view on any topic. It is proposed that cognitive development as defined by William Perry and critical thinking in general should be explicit goals of a freshman seminar program. In addition to cognitive development, the course is intended to help students develop communication skills and a sense of community in both the small seminar and the college-wide contexts. The role of seminar directors is to ask questions and to encourage students to think and speak. (SW)

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Cognitive Development as a Goal of Freshman Seminar

The Critical Issues Symposium
CIS 101-102
A Freshman Seminar Program
at
Winthrop College
Rock Hill, South Carolina 29733

Roger Baumgarte, Director
April 14, 1987

Introduction

Anyone who has worked with college students can verify the fact that freshmen deal with the challenges of college very differently than do juniors or seniors. This difference can be seen readily in the classroom. Freshmen tend to be more docile, passive and accepting of the professor as an authority figure. In general, they assume that a good student is one who takes notes diligently, reads all that is assigned and is able to get the right answers on examinations. In their view, asking questions and engaging in classroom discussions can be fun and interesting but tend to detract from the real purpose of the classroom which is the imparting of information by the professor.

Juniors and seniors by contrast are more willing to challenge the authority of the professor if not overtly at least covertly. They are much more likely to view the ideas of a given professor in the context of his or her discipline or orientation. They may say, or at least think, "Of course she would say that, after all she is a professor of psychology." Their idea of a good student would be one who can not only "learn" the material given but also use and relate it to a variety of contexts. Mature students think critically about the subject matter and assimilate it into their own way of thinking while realizing there are other legitimate perspectives. For them, asking questions, engaging in discussions and other forms of interactive learning are not just entertainment, but rather, important components of their own educational development.

The Winthrop College Critical Issues Symposium is designed to help freshmen experience this more mature approach to their education--to help them become active learners, questioners and critical thinkers, and to teach them the value of discussion and learning from one another. In this article, the author describes the Critical Issues Symposium (CIS)--its format, theoretical bases, goals, strategies and evaluation. The administrative and "political" aspects will also be explored since they are

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critical to the success of such a curriculum action which affects nearly every undergraduate student at this college.

Format

The Critical Issues Symposium is a required, one-credit-hour, graded course for each of both semesters of the freshman year. (In the fall of 1986, the second year of the program, 950 students were enrolled in 63 sections of size 15 led by 44 faculty and staff.) Students meet weekly and these meetings are conducted primarily in seminar fashion with the students actively engaged in discussion, debate or some other structured exercise. Each semester the seminar discussions focus on three different issues. For example, for one recent semester the three topics were sex-bias on college campuses, US-Soviet relations, and medical ethics. For each issue, a nationally recognized speaker addresses the entire freshman class presenting data and arguments relevant to the issue. These speeches are open to the public and typically attract other students, faculty and members of the community. Students take regular essay-style quizzes which cover information from the assigned readings, the speakers and classroom seminar activities.

Theoretical Basis

The primary theoretical underpinnings for the structure and strategies used in this course are based on the work of William Perry Jr. (1970), Nevitt Sanford (1966), and L. Lee Knefelkamp (1974).

THE PERRY SCHEME:

The primary goal of the program is to help students develop more mature ways of thinking and dealing with their educational experiences. Perry's scheme of the cognitive development of college students defines the progress in thinking strategies targeted by this program. According to Perry, college students undergo an evolution in the basic assumptions they make about the nature of learning and the roles of professor and student.

Simply stated, freshmen tend to view knowledge as quantitative in nature, consisting of a collection of facts. The basis for these facts is not a relevant issue for them. Professors are viewed as being largely responsible for the students' learning since they know the facts. Accordingly, it is their job to dispense these facts in a way that students can understand, remember and eventually return them

on examinations. Remembering and reproducing these facts when asked constitutes the students' primary responsibility in the enterprise of education. Facts, from this perspective, have a dichotomous nature being either correct or incorrect and therefore the grading of exams should be clear and unequivocal. The use of absolutes and dichotomies in their speech further evidence the underlying assumptions freshmen hold about the nature of learning. They also tend to prefer structured, traditional approaches in the classroom.

By contrast, mature college students view knowledge in a more relative fashion, assuming that information is based on a set of methods and sources which are critical to evaluating the information itself. Professors are viewed as important sources of information but do embody a point of view among a number of possible points of view. They prefer classes that are interactive in nature as they view other students as potential sources of useful and legitimate ideas and information. These students assume responsibility for their own thinking and learning and their language reflects more analysis and synthesis processes.

This description of the progression in the thinking of college students defines, in a very general fashion, a major portion of the Perry scheme and constitutes the dimensions along which cognitive development is being encouraged in CIS 101-102.

THE KNEFELKAMP EXPERIMENT:

The structural aspects and teaching strategies have been heavily influenced by the unpublished dissertation of L. Lee Knefelkamp. She succeded in enhancing the cognitive development of freshman in a writing course by encouraging them to be activistic in the classroom, allowing them to explore alternate points of view on any topic being presented, and by challenging their absolutist statements. As she pointed out, since freshmen tend not to view student participation as a legitimate form of education, it is important that an appropriate classroom environment be established to nurture a mature approach to these activities.

SANFORD'S CONCEPT OF CHALLENGES AND SUPPORTS:

The Critical Issues Symposium draws on Nevitt Sanford's idea that there must be a healthy balance between the challenges presented by any educational experience and the supports provided the students to sustain their efforts in meeting these challenges. The challenges for students in this course consist of developing a more mature approach to learning by assuming more responsibility, by seeing the

value of learning through one's own reflection and interaction with peers, and by viewing all information as relevant to its bases and assumptions. The Critical Issues Symposium attempts to support students faced with these challenges through small-group seminars, warm and personable seminar directors, and highly structured classroom activities designed to foster students' activism and thinking about issues from varying perspectives.

Goals

Since CIS 101-102 involves a large number of faculty and staff seminar directors, it is essential that all seminars function on the same set of goals although actual implementation may vary a great deal from one section of the course to the next. These goals are a direct outgrowth of the theoretical bases described in the preceding section.

COMMUNITY:

Specifically, the Critical Issues Symposium has three goals the first of which is called "community." While this goal is important throughout the year, it is most relevant to the opening weeks of the fall term. This course is intended to ease students' transition into college and improve their chances of persevering. To help them feel welcome and part of the academic community, activities are directed toward developing supportive relationships between each other and with members of the faculty and staff. Most other freshman-level courses are large, lecture-style sections characterized by very little interaction. By contrast, the Critical Issues Symposium is an attempt to humanize students' first year experience, to provide them with a forum for involvement, activism and growth in their educational endeavors. The community goal is also essential for implementing the other goals of the course. Students will not be willing to speak out, explore and express their ideas if they do not feel comfortable with their classmates and director.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS:

The second goal is communication skills. Activities are structured to encourage students to listen carefully, speak coherently and write effectively. Students engage in debates and role-play activities which often require them to defend a point of view. Writing is encouraged through essay-style exams, reports on speakers and journals which allow for open dialogue between students and seminar directors.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT:

The third and most important goal is cognitive development. Once students feel comfortable with the seminar format and begin to discuss issues openly, it is critical that what they communicate be based on considered reflection. Achievement of this goal is facilitated by the use of issues which naturally allow students to take a position and defend it when asked to do so. To encourage a broadening of perspective, students are frequently asked to understand or defend a point of view other than their own. On the topic of US-Soviet relations for example, activities were designed to raise their awareness of Soviet culture, history, and approach to foreign policy. Students were asked to explain how a Soviet might view a specific current event. Likewise students are ecouraged to understand the basis of their own point of view.

It is also essential that students view discussion and other seminar activities as academically legitimate and not just social interaction. The learning and achievement aspects of this course require frequent reinforcement to maintain this attitude among students. At the end of each class students are frequently asked to summarize what they have accomplished during that meeting. The journals are used to encourage them to reflect on their seminar experiences. Essay questions are often drawn from seminar discussions to reinforce the perception that these are learning activities. Above all, students are often reminded that the purpose of this course is to challenge them to think more maturely, to view education as more complex than just correct answers on examinations, and to accept the responsibility for developing information and arguments reflecting multiple perspectives on the issues being discussed.

Specific Strategies

To meet the goals outlined above, it is essential that the course be conducted in seminar fashion. Seminar directors are never thought of, or referred to, as teachers, instructors or professors. Their job is to structure and conduct a seminar, to ask questions, to encourage students to think and speak. Except for examinations, the use of lectures or other forms of authoritarian teaching strategies are avoided.

Focusing on the community goal, the first topic in the fall term is always "education." This segment is not dealt with as an issue per se, but rather, these weeks are spent on helping students get to know one another, their seminar directors and the facilities and opportunities in the

academic community. Most of the time is spent on helping break the ice and ease students' transitions into their new lifestyles. For seminars to be effective in the cognitive realm, it is essential that students loose their inhibitions about sharing their ideas in front of the class. One such structured activity involves students being assigned to groups and required to meet outside of class time to gather specific information about each other. Other seminar directors take their students through an outdoor obstacle course designed to facilitate group communication and cooperation. This section of the course is also intended to help students clarify their goals and ambitions for attending college. Study skills, time management, handling personal issues might also be addressed if the seminar participants view them as pertinent.

With respect to the cognitive and communication goals, students are expected to develop, express and defend their opinions on the issues being discussed. This type of activity does not come naturally to freshmen. To incite their involvement, seminars frequently resort to structured activities which require their participation. Students may be given roles to play in mock situations involving the issue. Debates are frequently conducted to sensitize students to all aspects of the issues. Occasionally students are asked to argue or defend the side opposite their own opinion, the assumption being that they will understand and be able to defend their own point of view more effectively if they thoroughly understand the opposing viewpoint. Structured games, values clarification tasks, data collection projects are ideal for breaking the ice and getting students thinking, talking and acting on the issues. Seminar directors are also given training to develop skills in structuring and leading classroom discussions.

Some of the topics chosen are naturally interesting and relevant to the students. Other topics are somewhat removed from their immediate experience, and may have the effect of broadening their perspective. However developing participation frequently requires some ingenuity on the part of seminar directors. Sharing ideas among seminar directors is critical and therefore several avenues of communication are maintained throughout the course. Seminar directors congregate for small- and large-group meetings five times throughout each semester, and a cooperative newsletter helps keep lines of communication open. Each seminar also elects a student representative who meets with the administrators of the program in group feedback sessions twice during each semester. These meetings help shape the direction of the program, decide on issues for the following semester, and bring problems to light when they occur.

Administration

The Critical Issues Symposium requires a plenary committment on the part of the institution. In a typical semester at Winthrop there are over 60 sections of this course and over 40 faculty and staff involved. Winthrop College has a university-style administration with five academic units: The College of Arts and Sciences, and the Schools of Business, Education and Music, and the library which are accountable to the Vice President for Academic Affairs. Administratively, this course is not housed withing any of these academic units, but rather, functions independently under the leadership of the Vice President. This configuration facilitates the interdisciplinary staffing of the course, allowing seminar directors to be recruited from the five academic units and other segments of the College, includiong the student-services sector.

Teaching faculty are allowed released time from one three-hour course for serving as seminar directors for two sections of the Critical Issues Symposium. Administrators and staff personnel (with at least a Masters Degree) also volunteer to serve as seminar directors as a way to maintain teaching skills and contact with students without committing to a regular three-credit-hour course.

The details of the program are administered by three faculty members (with additional released time) working out of the office of the Vice President. They divide the responsibilities of program staffing, scheduling, developing topics and readings, screening and recruiting speakers, collecting data, reviewing evaluations, arranging meetings with seminar directors and student representatives, etc. They also work with a committee of volunteer seminar directors meeting weekly who wish to impact the nature and direction of the program.

One clear disadvantage of this configuration is the "free-floating" nature of the program. The course is not "institutionalized" in the sense of being housed within any of the existing academic units; rather, it depends heavily upon the Vice President of Academic Affairs. A personnel change in this key position could have serious implications for the future well-being of the program. The secondary leadership is provided by faculty with release time from what they would consider their primary responsibility to the institution. While this administrative strategy facilitates the interdisciplinary staffing of the course, it also leaves it structurally unstable and vulnerable to budget cuts or a change in the personnel or philosophy of the central administration.

Currently being considered is a plan to establish it within one of the academic units while still allowing it to draw on faculty and staff from the other units. The obvious difficulty with this arrangement is the problem of recruiting faculty across disciplinary borders. It is one thing for a dean to allow his/her faculty to work for the Vice President, but quite another to turn over faculty resources to a "competing" dean and school.

Faculty Development

Some of the same goals the Symposium holds for students also seem to be gained by the seminar directors. The Symposium has become an opportunity for faculty and staff with varying backgrounds and training to congregate regularly to share ideas and strategies concerning their teaching. These meetings reflect a great deal of interdisciplinary diversity focused on a common set of goals. Faculty debate the relevance of specific course requirements, grading strategies, etc. but at the same time seem to learn from each other and develop their own sense of community analogous to what is being achieved in the seminars for the students. Some meetings involve all of the seminar directors and are primarily decision-making or policy-forming meetings. Others consist of smaller groups which meet and share successes and failures.

Each fall before the beginning of classes, all seminar directors participate in a six-hour workshop which reviews the theoretical basis for the course, its goals, objectives and recommended teaching strategies. Seminar directors review current data on entering freshmen and by means of structured exercises attempt to develop a clear understanding and empathy for their cognitive, personality and social characteristics. The topics selected for that semester are presented along with background materials and strategies for dealing with these issues within their seminars. The majority of the course preparation for seminar directors is done in this session.

The program also has several elements which provide seminar directors with feedback about their work with students. Students and seminar directors write to each other weekly in journal format as a form of open communication. The seminars elect student representatives who meet in groups with the three faculty administrators of the program to provide feedback and make suggestions. Their comments are summarized and discussed in one of the meetings of the seminar directors. At the end of each semester students complete written evaluations containing both

objective and open-ended items. Specific concerns raised in these evaluations are addressed in the faculty workshop for the following semester. The quantitative aspects of these evaluations are also summarized to allow comparisons between sections without violating anonymity of individual seminar directors.

A key element in the entire feedback process is that none of the results are used for faculty evaluation purposes. All of these data serve a feedback/faculty development function only. Because of the strong, explicit administrative support, participation in the program alone is considered to be a positive element to add to a faculty member's year-end evaluation report.

Perhaps the most concrete manisfestation of the faculty development aspects of the Symposium are the comments of the seminar directors themselves as they struggle with the challenge of encouraging students to be active participants in the learning process. Many of the faculty working in this program are accustomed to teaching content-oriented, lecture-style courses. Conducting a seminar is very foreign to their past teaching experiences. Through student feedback, workshops, group meetings and private discussions with other seminar directors, they eventually develop the skills necessary to be effective leaders of freshmen seminars. Experienced seminar directors will often comment that they have developed teaching skills they never thought possible for them. They can now lead a truly effective class discussion. They also feel that they know more about students and student culture than ever before, which allows them to communicate to students more effectively.

Assessment

Just completing its second year, only preliminary data are currently available documenting the effectiveness of the Critical Issues Symposium. Also, since the course is required of all freshmen, there is no control group with whom direct comparisons can be made. Hence, at this point only very indirect indicators can be used to measure its impact.

Attrition in the freshman class is lower this year than it has been for the last four years. Also the difference between the grade point averages of those who drop out of college versus those who stay is significantly larger compared to previous years. The implication is that students are more likely to stay in school and those who do leave probably do so for purely academic reasons. It is

impossible to determine if these effects are attributable to the Symposium or other programs focusing on freshmen here at Winthrop.

Clearly the most interesting and relevant data would be those documenting the cognitive maturation of students over the span of the freshmen year. Again the lack of a comparison group will make it difficult to assign specific causes to any measurable changes. Two strategies are now being explored. One is to find a measure of development along the Perry scheme for which freshman-year norms have been established to use for comparison. A second strategy is to find an appropriate college with which to make a comparison. Either strategy will require valid, reliable measures of progress on the Perry scheme to use in a pre/post-test design. It is hoped that either or both strategies can be implemented by the fall semester of 1987.

Students' responses on course evaluations at the end of each semester have been tallied for each of the three stated goals of the course: Cognitive development, communication skills and community (see the section on goals above). Unfortunately, the actual wording of the questions and the Likert response scales used to measure these factors have varied over the three semesters and so have the data. One objective item on these evaluations which has shown some reliability is a question which asks students whether the Symposium program should be continued. Each semester, 73% of the students have responded "Yes." Regardless of the past stability of that statistic, we hope to do better this semester!

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